

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW

### Bang for the New Music Buck

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By Thomas Goss

The Other Minds Festival has always been about stamina, and not only the fortitude and endurance that it takes nowadays to create a truly original and moving piece of music. There is also a requirement of strength from the audience, a trial of focus and attention level as wonders to the ear and imagination are paraded in sequence for hours.

This weekend's series was no exception. Friday's tribute to Lou Harrison, along with assorted acoustic/electronic compositions, clocked in at three hours. Saturday's triple concert of Kronos Quartet, Continuum Ensemble, and Randy Weston's African Rhythms Quintet was precisely four hours long. Taken altogether with Thursday's concert, the festival offered nearly ten hours of new music (including intermissions), representing one of the Bay Area's best deals in contemporary music concert-going. If you factor in the artist forums which preceded each concert, along with the upbeat energy of the audience itself, "Other Minds 8" truly offered bang for the new music buck.

The standout work on Friday was Lou Harrison's *Trio for Violin, Cello, & Piano* by the Harmida Piano Trio. This was absolutely brilliant trio writing, on a par in craft with the Ravel Trio. Lines of plain beauty and gentle passion intersected in dialogue between cellist Emil Miland and violinist Dawn Harms, connected by the sure hand of Laura Dahl at the piano. Medieval simplicities bookended ever-intensifying episodes of thematic ecstasy in the first movement, while the inherent contradictions of the second served as a metaphor for the complex personality of its dedicatee Virgil Thomson. "Dance: Rhapsody: Song" was a triptych of solos for each instrumentalist, a folksy dance for fiddle, a dark rhapsody of jolting piano octaves, and a tender cello aria with a painful edge of longing. The concluding Allegro's plethora of colors and moods overflowed as demoniacally-droll staccato plinks at the extremes of the piano circuted a vigorous consonance of inner string voices.

### Dessert

If the Trio was the cake in this 85th birthday celebration for Harrison, his Harpsichord Sonata and tack piano music as performed by keyboardist Linda Burman-Hall were the punch and the icing. The sonata bore some of the edge-of-the-seat restlessness of his Organ Concerto, while the pseudo-rococo tone of the tack piano in his incidental music for Corneille's *Cinna* found Harrison in a mood more contemplative than crafty.

The rest of Friday night felt a bit anticlimactic and muted, for all the excellence of the material. *Duende*, composer and installation maven Annea Lockwood's collaboration with baritone Thomas Buckner, featured a panoply of vocal sounds taken from shamanic sources backed up by a tape accompaniment of ear-compressing glass gongs, wind, rattles and whinnying parrots. Richard Teitelbaum's *Blends* contrasted the momentum and opposing energies of Masayuki Koga's shakuhachi and Geoffrey Gordon's tabla, with occasional interference and tonal steering from the composer at a Kurzweil synthesizer.

The reappearance of Thursday night's Ondes Martenot specialist Takashi Harada lightened the mood considerably in the duos with pianist Hiroko Sakurazawa written by himself and by Toru Takemitsu. Harada's arrangement of Takemitsu's *Distance de Fée* imbued all possible soul into a part originally written for violin, with some success. His own *Voyage en septembre* abounded with Post-Impressionist influence and electronic wit.

### **Lovely solo piano**

Pianist Sarah Cahill showed her mettle at Friday evening's casual conclusion with a brace of works by Pauline Oliveros and Leo Ornstein. Inside all of the brittle ditties and mathematical pretensions of Oliveros' *Play Pen* was a fun, dancy chase of the tail. Ornstein's *Morning in the Woods* had a quiet center of contemplation around its impressionistic arabesques and strettos. Both works were apt showpieces for Cahill's brand of sensitive and empathetic pianism.

Saturday evening started with neither a bang nor a twang, but with the long, drawn-out scraping of rosined fingertips against 90-foot-long strings. *Stratified Bands: Last Kind Words* featured Kronos Quartet in performance with composer Ellen Fullman and her Long String Instrument. The instrument itself was so huge that it had to be placed at the very back of the stage. This situation was complicated by the placement of Kronos in front of the area in which Fullman did most of her playing, the region of strings closer to the soundboard. This made it difficult for the audience to see what she was doing much of the time and to discern the possible subtleties and gradations of tone against the accompaniment of Kronos, whose quiet meanderings seemed to block rather than underscore the effect of the instrument.

Nevertheless, when unaccompanied, the instrument itself had a most unusual and entrancing sound. The lower strings were as rich and complex in overtones as a huge bell, and the higher strings were particularly present, even penetrating without being overwhelming. Fullman walked slowly back and forth along the strings, her hands rubbing and pinching the metal to create the potent vibrations. The sense of choreography and spatial habitation was as potent a force as the sound, culminating at the end in an abrupt series of flung-out chords, rasping and grinding against a suddenly energized Kronos.

## **Jolting juxtaposition**

The second set had some of the same piecemeal effect of the previous evening. Annea Lockwood presented another exercise in ringing tones, well-conceived and beautifully played by percussionists William Winant and Ches Smith, but uncomfortably on the heels of the dreamy buzz of Fullman's long strings. Ricardo Tacuchian's *Estructuras Gêmeas*, a piano duet featuring Cheryl Seltzer and Joel Sachs of Continuum, felt nostalgic of composition's bad-boy era in its playful tone-clusters, atonality and back-and-forth bravura.

The set didn't quite cohere until the presentation of Tania León's two works by Continuum, *Arenas d'un tiempo* and *Canto*. "The Sands of León's Time" seemed to have deliciously creepy little moments of bass-note chaos from pianist Seltzer. Gestures both funky and sly punctuated the proceedings as clarinetist David Gresham and cellist Kristina Reiko Cooper sang together as one voice and then as separate creatures. The trio fleshed out to quintet with the addition of marimbist Tom Kolor and baritone Thomas Buckner in the *Canto*, with Sachs returning as director. Cellist Cooper was outstanding as second voice to Buckner, whose vocal stylings brought meaning and depth to themes of nature, transcendence, and emotion in the texts of these settings of Cuban poets.

After three hours of all of this intense individualism, Randy Weston brought relief with a liberating dose of synergetic jamming. Presenting his jazz quintet as a compositional extension of the African experience, he proved the point with integrated, well-structured compositions and arrangements. A giant of a man, he made the concert grand at which he sat look babyish, directing his group with sensitivity and easy authority through works by African and American jazz composers, most notably in a tour-de-force interpretation of Gillespie's *African Sunrise*.

The continental roots of this transfigured bop were underlined by the percussion of Neil Clark on congas and djembé, fusing elements of tribal rhythms with Caribbean and High-life patterns. Though saxophonist T.K. Blue and trombonist Benny Powell each had their share of knockout solos, the real star was bassist Alex Blake. His adventurous playing blended the direct warmth of African music with the sophistication of jazz, then added both the energy of rock and the innovation of contemporary art music. It was a fittingly unorthodox way to end the proceedings, and a masterful gesture by the organizers of Other Minds not only towards the recognition of jazz as serious music but towards Weston himself, whose compositions stand up in quality to any presented at this festival.